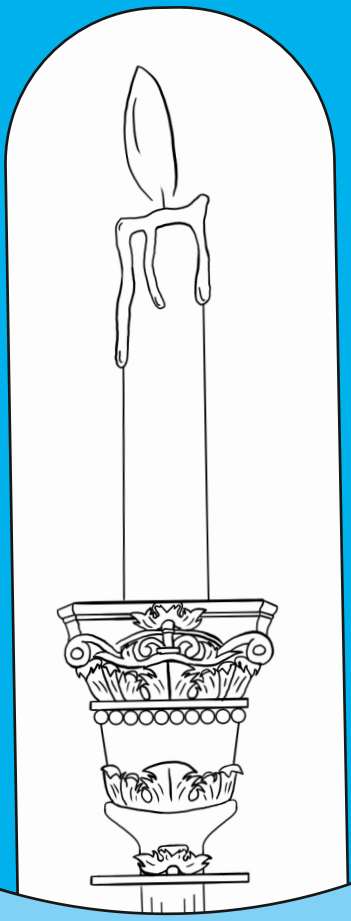
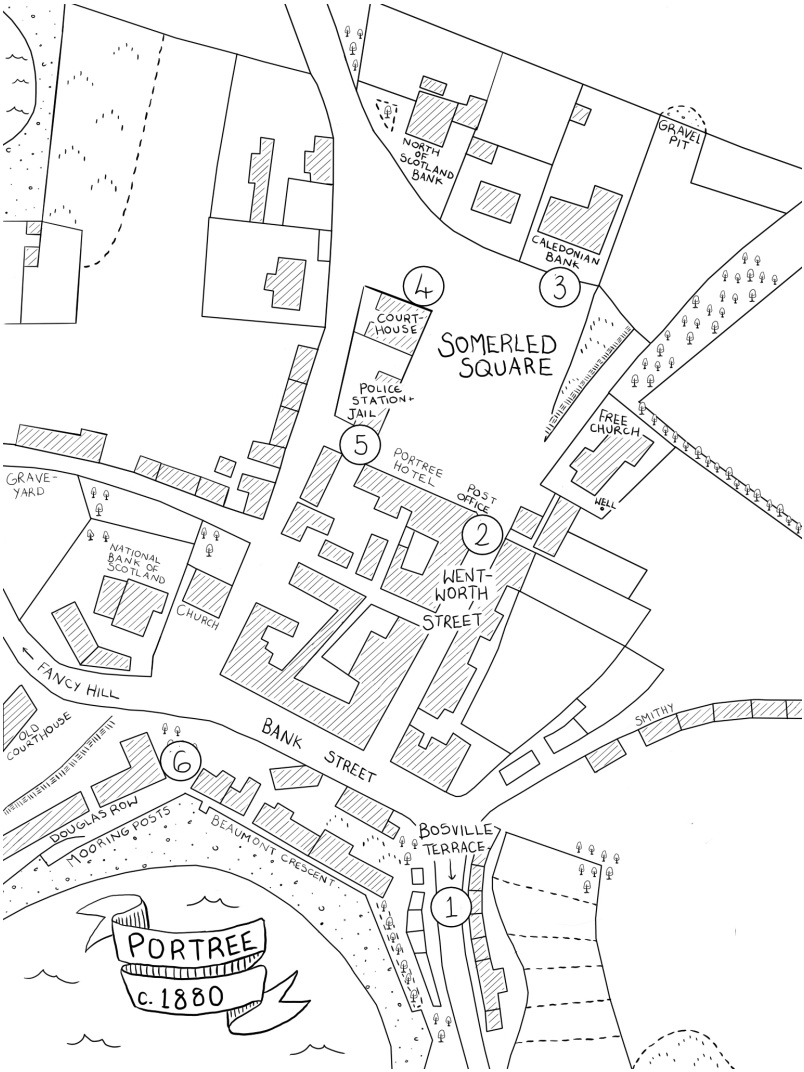
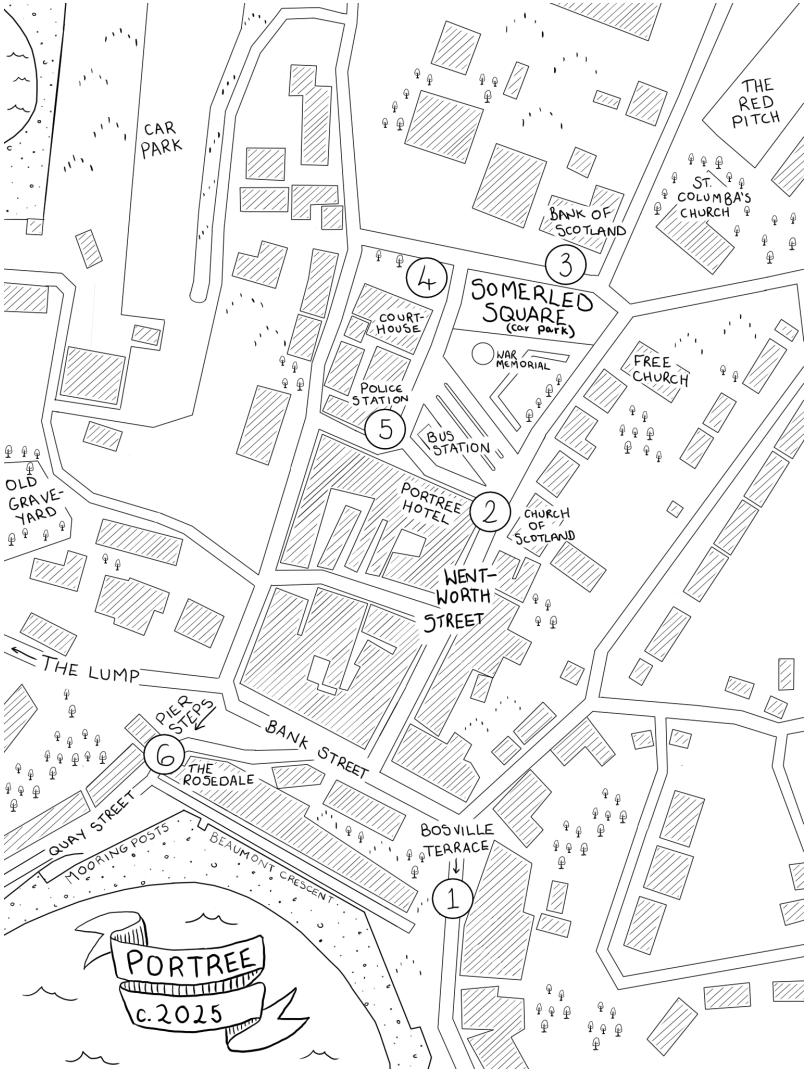
PLOTTING THE PROTEST: PORTREE

A walking tour zine about land and protest in the 1880s

by Grace Wright




NORTH OF SCOTLAND BANK
GRAVEL PIT
CALEDONIAN BANK
3
4
COURT-HOUSE
SOMERLED SQUARE
POLICE STATION + JAIL
5
PORTREE HOTEL
POST OFFICE
FREE CHURCH
WELL
GRAVE-YARD
NATIONAL BANK OF SCOTLAND
CHURCH
2
WENT-WORTH STREET
FANCY HILL
SMITHY
OLD COURTHOUSE
6
BANK STREET
DOUGLAS ROW
MOORING POSTS
BEAUMONT CRESCENT
BOSVILLE TERRACE
1
PORTREE
c. 1880


CAR PARK
THE RED PITCH
ST COLUMBA'S CHURCH
BANK OF SCOTLAND
3
4
SOMERLED SQUARE (car park)
COURT-HOUSE
WAR MEMORIAL
FREE CHURCH
POLICE STATION
5
BUS STATION
OLD GRAVE-YARD
PORTREE HOTEL
2
CHURCH OF SCOTLAND
WENT-WORTH STREET
THE LUMP
PIER STEPS
BANK STREET
6
THE ROSEDALE
QUAY STREET
MOORING POSTS
BEAUMONT CRESCENT
BOSVILLE TERRACE
1
PORTREE
c. 2025

INTRO

Hello! My name is Grace Wright. I am a PhD student researching women's participation in a period of Highland and Island land agitation in the 1880s which has become known as the "Crofters' War." This area of work is personal to me; this is the history of my place and my people. However, its importance stretches beyond that. These histories shape land politics in the Highlands and Islands today and are always drawn on when we discuss where we are and where we're going. With that in mind, what does it mean for our understanding of land and its management today if women are absent from these histories?

In the author's notes of his 'Red Sky in Morning', Paul Lynch – in explaining why he writes fictional stories about the history of his own people and place – wrote 'I could see the whites of their eyes.' By this, he meant that they were familiar to him through their shared culture, history and language. He knew how they would speak, move through the landscape, and their mannerisms, passed down through the generations to himself and his peers. This is what I wanted to capture a sense of for Portree of the 1880s. I will take you on a tour of the village, diving into what it meant to live through – and be involved in – this tumultuous period in Skye's history.

To do this, I am drawing on my own research, some of it from my thesis and some from various related but wayward rabbit holes I have followed since I started working in the area in 2021. This is based mostly on archives – Skye and Lochalsh Archive Centre, the Clan Donald Archives and Library, and the National Records of Scotland. It, hopefully, does a good job of showing the wealth of what is in these places with a bit of digging – and the generous help of the folk working in them.

Where it was hard to find the voices of the people living on the land, as it often is with their marginalisation in the official records which most often survive to be archived, this was supplemented with newspapers. More detail on the sources used is available in the online version of the zine - see the 'One More Thing' section at the end. I have also put together a list of my favourite books, articles, and resources if you would like to find out more about the general area.

First, some definitions. ‘Crofting’ is a small-scale form of agriculture based on leased plots of land – ‘crofts’ – and large tracts of land held in common by communities, mostly used for animal grazing. Crofts did not, by design, provide enough to support the crofter and their family. This meant people had to find other forms of income in places with limited option: the work that was available locally required skills, training, and investment – like blacksmithing, shoemaking, and teaching – or was limited in availability – such as domestic work and farm labouring. Others were controlled by the landowning class and intended to benefit them – like the precarious kelp industry. Many travelled for seasonal work, following the fishing or agricultural work across the country and beyond, sending their earnings home to pay the rent.

Crofters were not the only people living on the land. There was also a large cottar population; people who had no land, and often no leases, and depended on wage incomes, meaning that their place on the land was often even more precarious than that of crofters. More marginalised yet were the squatters, who usually lived on common grazings and paid no rent, sometimes seizing small plots of land to cultivate. When we talk about the 'Crofters' War’, it is important to note that despite the name, both of these groups were heavily involved and their needs – largely for land, and plenty of it –

were at the centre of the land reform movement of the 1880s.

Over the course of decades building up to the 1880s, the people living and working on the land in the Highlands and Islands struggled in the face of a land management system weighted against them. Increasing rents and shrinking crofts pushed them to the limits of what they could endure. The result of this was summed up in 'The Oban Times' in 1881:

> 'Does it not mean that the land cannot pay the rent, and that the landlord's money must be wrung from the ocean?'

The situation worsened as the decade progressed. Vicious weather meant poor harvests and fishing and people were driven to a breaking point. Then, the tide turned. Across the Highlands and Islands, tenants began to respond with land agitation: protest which pushed for the protection and expansion of their rights to live on and work the land. This took many forms, from land raids to rent strikes to physical confrontations with police and landlord agents. We'll get more into the guts of what this meant in Portree through the tour.

Land agitation saw some results with the passing of the Crofters' Holdings (Scotland) Act in 1886. This completely changed the balance of power between tenant and landlord; it gave crofters more security in their tenancies, a process for the setting of fair rent, and rights to compensation for improvements made to their land. It also stated that crofters could pass their tenancies on as inheritance, bringing it more in line with traditional beliefs around landholding and limiting the power of the landlord to move or evict small tenants.

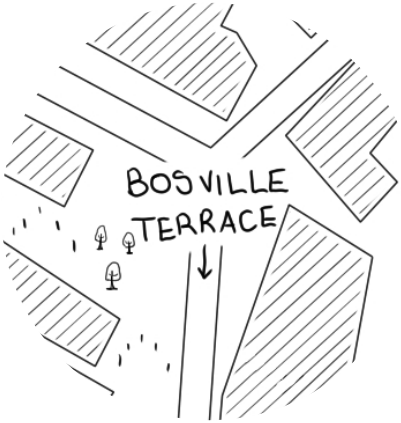
This, however, did not address the core causes of agitation – the lack of land. People's needs hadn't been met. Further

legislation would follow to address this, but so would further agitation. Land raids and arrests continued well into the twentieth century.

These are not issues that are in the past. In 2023, the average cost of a home in the Highlands and Islands was £20,000 higher than that of the rest of Scotland. Despite having only 2% of Scotland's total houses, 17% of the country's second homes are in the islands – houses that are only used part of the time and often sit empty. According to a 2024 survey, 62% of young people plan to move away because of the lack of affordable housing. This has knock-on effects for all areas of life in communities affected, including – but certainly not limited to – education, culture, medical care, and language.

The parallels between the 1880s and today are striking. In 1883, the government conducted an inquiry into how people lived in the Highlands and islands – known as the 'Napier Commission.' It interviewed people across society, and dipping into the transcripts now gives a sense of history repeating itself. Precarious housing, lack of employment opportunities, the decline of culture and the Gaelic language, the issues caused by an unpredictable climate, and the best ways of managing the landscape are oft-covered topics in the Commission, and all feature today in anxiety around the future of life in Skye and across the Highlands and Islands.

The causes of and answers to these deep-rooted issues are outwith what I can do in these pages, but this zine does serve to show that they have been grappled with for generations. In addition, as protest is increasingly criminalised, these radical histories of resistance remind us that dissent has always been part of progress and justice. Remembering them is, therefore, an important resource for the struggles of the present.



1: BOSVILLE TERRACE

We are going to start off on Bosville Terrace, outside the hotel. If you were to stand here on 25 October 1886, you would meet a group of policemen returning from Herbusta on the Kilmuir Estate. In the 1880s, this belonged to William Fraser who had bought the estate in 1855 and immediately set about making changes. In just two decades, he had increased rents by more than 160%. At the same time, crofts were being subdivided- broken up to make more plots for a growing population- meaning they were shrinking. Despite having had some of the most productive land in Skye in the past, the small crofts were suffering from overcropping and the soil was losing fertility; some crofters harvesting less than they sowed. People were growing increasingly frustrated with the way the estate was being managed. When, in 1877, a flood washed away Fraser's hunting lodge, many saw it as an act of God, condemning his treatment of the tenantry.

When the harsh winter of 1880-1881 saw conditions on the Kilmuir estate worsen still further, the tenants of Valtos and Elishadder on the east coast of the estate announced that they would not pay their rent until it was reduced.
This rent strike spread. Where there was just over £63 of

outstanding rent in June 1880, by early 1887 over £10,000 had gone unpaid.

This was what policemen returning from the Kilmuir Estate in October 1886 were trying to address; they had been serving notices calling for the payment of the outstanding rents. However, on reaching the township of Herbusta they were met by a group of crofters and cottars armed with sticks and stones who turned the police back before they could serve their notices. Those involved would later report that they resisted because they thought that the officers were going to take away their cattle – a cornerstone of making ends meet in a crofting family.

If, once the policemen passed you on Bosville Terrace, you happened to glance at the bay, you would see the troopship. The 1880s saw a series of military expeditions sent to the Highlands and Islands to support the police in the suppression of land agitation. The 1886 expedition was made up of 100 marines and a military troopship, the HMS Seahorse.

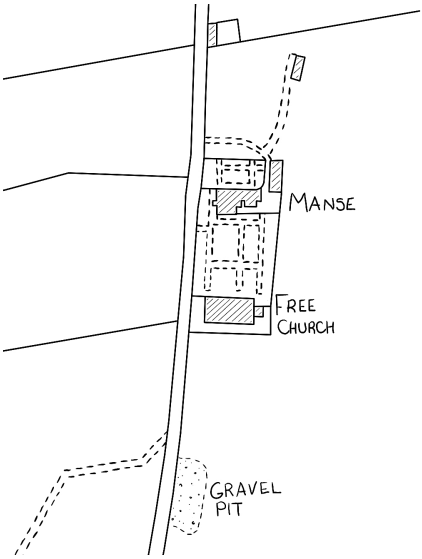
This was comparatively small: in 1884, the west coast was patrolled by a flotilla of a troopship, a gunship, and the Lochiel, carrying between them 300 marines. To pacify some of the most disturbed areas of agitation, 250 of these were marched around the north end of Skye in a show of force. The Lochiel was a civilian steamer, chartered as a mobile barracks for the troops. On learning the nature of the

job they had been hired for, most of the crew and the captain of the Lochiel resigned.

Ultimately, the presence of this military force meant that the reaction to the Herbusta deforcement was swift and severe. Just two days later, on the 27th of October, HMS Seahorse landed 70 policemen and marines at Borneskitaig. They then marched on Herbusta with a list of ringleaders to arrest, lead by Sheriff William Ivory, the man responsible for the maintenance of law and order in Inverness-shire.

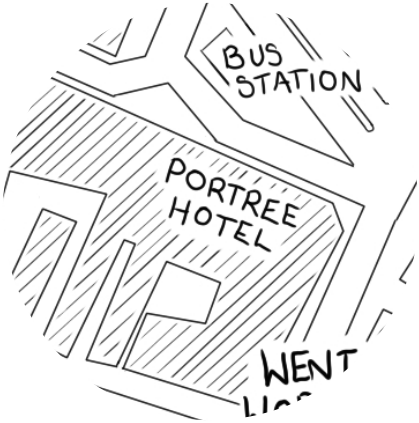
On reaching Herbusta, they found the township empty. Spurred on by Ivory, the police spent two hours searching houses, byres, and the surrounding landscape. Two arrests were eventually made. The first was of John Beaton, the local cowherd, who was returning from the common grazing. Despite insisting that he was not involved in the deforcement, he was taken to jail in Portree where he was held for two days and then released without explanation or charge. Beaton sought justice for his treatment, accusing Sheriff Ivory of unlawful arrest. While this was ultimately unsuccessful, the case is still cited in court as an example in the area of law. The second arrest was of Anne MacMillan, a young woman who would face serious consequences for her brush with the law.

The men wanted in connection with the Herbusta deforcement had disappeared into the surrounding landscape. All the while, the police were receiving reports – the Herbusta men were digging their tatties as usual, going home for their tea, and attending church. This, they saw as an opportunity and on the 7th of November they surrounded the church at Kilmuir. Two policemen in plain clothes attended the service,



choosing seats close to the door. Three policemen hid in a nearby gravel pit, four in a stable, and two by the side of the road between Herbusta and the church. However, someone had warned the Herbusta men and they all steered clear of the service. They would go on to successfully evade the police for over a month. We will return to the Herbusta crofters and their experience of the justice system later.

Meanwhile, Sheriff Ivory had grown suspicious. Land agitators across the island were too good at pre-empting the movements of the police. Someone was warning them in advance, someone with the access or influence to find out the plans of the law, and that someone – Ivory concluded – was using the telegraph network to communicate with communities across the island.



2: PORTREE HOTEL

We are going to continue down Bank Street and take a right onto Wentworth Street, stopping again outside Portree Hotel and what was the Portree Post Office. At this point in time, the telegraph network was run by the post office as a branch of their activities. It was also the beating heart of administrative power, used to connect the central government to its scattered branches. Thus, having someone sympathetic on the lines would offer huge opportunities to land agitators.

In the 1880s, Portree Post Office was run by postmaster Alexander Neish, who was the first to face Ivory's questioning about the telegraph network and its use by land agitators. The Sheriff asked him who was sending telegrams to Glendale and Kilmuir – Skye's most disturbed districts at the time – and what they were saying. However, Neish claimed he did not know. He had nothing to do with most of the telegrams which passed through the office; he had an assistant to do that for him. This was Mary Jane MacKenzie, a 17-year-old who had been working at Portree Post Office since 1881.

Ivory grew frustrated by repeated roadblocks in his

investigation - he wasn't allowed to view the telegram records kept by the post office, his superiors wouldn't launch a more in-depth investigation, and questioning key figures in the land movement yielded no information. So, Ivory took matters into his own hands on the morning of 25 May 1885 and made his way to Portree Post Office. Once there, he forced his way into the telegraph room – which was supposed to be closed to public access – and demanded Mary tell him who was sending the land agitators information. She refused, pointing out that she was not supposed to remember any of the telegrams which passed through her hands.

According to the 1868 Telegraph Act, it was a crime to try to persuade a post office worker to disclose the contents of a telegram without the permission of the sender. By confronting Mary, Ivory had committed an offence which carried a two-year prison sentence. What's more, the exchange had witnesses: two Portree residents, tailor Donald Kemp and boatbuilder John Nicolson. Within days, newspapers across the country were printing their account of Ivory's misconduct. The public response was swift and outraged. Though he was never officially charged, the Sheriff's reputation was damaged beyond repair; the telegram investigation was taken out of his hands entirely and he was instructed to consult with someone before taking any drastic actions in future. This, for a man who was used to working largely under his own direction, must have nettled Ivory.

Meanwhile, Mary Jane MacKenzie became a local hero. She was paraded through the streets in a chair to celebrate her courage and speeches were made about her loyalty at a meeting to honour her where she was given a purse of sovereigns, a gesture used repeatedly by land agitators to reward key supporters. As well as her role in passing along

telegrams which contained vital information, by refusing to identify the person sending them, she provided him with the protection of anonymity.

However, Mary's courage came at a cost. In November 1885, six months after the confrontation with Ivory, she was given what was referred to as a 'promotion' by the post office. It also, however, meant she had to move from Portree to Glasgow, which put an end to the potential conflict of interests of her staying in her position in Portree and continuing with her role in the land reform movement.

Then, during the military expedition of 1886 – seemingly without reason – Ivory focussed his attention on Kyleakin and the eviction of a widow living in the schoolhouse there. This was Jane MacKenzie, Mary's mother.

Jane MacKenzie had been in rent arrears and had been threatened with eviction before, but had come to an agreement with the estate factor, Alexander MacDonald, where her son paid the debt off over the course of several months. However, on 13 October 1886, just over a year after the confrontation between Mary and Ivory, a decree of removing was issued against Jane which gave her just 48 hours to leave her home on the estate of Lord MacDonald of Armadale.

No reason was given for the reversal of the estate's agreement not to evict Jane. However, Alexander MacDonald was a close friend of Sheriff Ivory's. This, perhaps, provides an explanation. Left without a home, Jane had to relocate to join her daughter in Glasgow.

3: BANK OF SCOTLAND

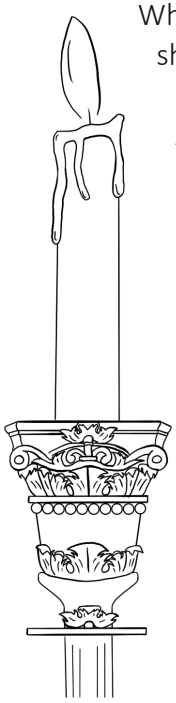
We are now going to follow Ivory's suspicions along the side of Somerled Square to the Bank of Scotland, which in the 1880s was the Caledonian Bank.

In the flat above lived Dugald MacLachlan, agent for the bank and Sheriff-Clerk Depute for Portree. He was also, according to Ivory, the person sending the incendiary telegrams to land agitators. His role in court involved assisting with its everyday operations, including preparing legal documentation and giving advice on procedures. This would have placed Dugald in a prime position for supporting land agitators, both in terms of their navigation of the court system and in collecting information from law enforcement to assist them in their organisation.

Ivory spent two years investigating Dugald, from November 1884 until he was dismissed from his position in court in October 1886. As part of this, the Sheriff was having Dugald watched by the police, who were sending frequent reports of Dugald’s movements and lists of the people he was associating with.

This means that we now have detailed information on what he was doing day-to-day. For example, we know that on 13th November 1884 he met up with John MacPherson, one of the so-called 'Glendale Martyrs' who had spent two months in prison for his involvement in a dispute over grazing at Waterstein Farm. The two of them, along with John MacInnes, owner of Portree Hotel, and Neish, the postmaster, had a meeting in Dugald's home above the Caledonian Bank. They then, as a group, proceeded on to Portree Hotel– presumably for refreshments.

Eventually, Dugald was dismissed from his position at court by the Secretary for Scotland, under pressure from Ivory. This was a deeply unpopular decision and a petition was circulated in Skye calling for him to be re-instated which was signed by over 2,300 people – a huge mobilisation of political voice. While this was ultimately unsuccessful, it does show Dugald's local popularity.

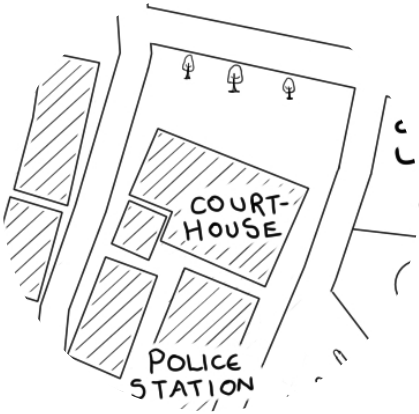


As well as the petition, the crofters and cottars of Skye showed their appreciation more directly with a party thrown in his honor in December 1886. At this, he was presented with tokens of the appreciation of the land agitators: a gold watch and – as with Mary Jane MacKenzie – a purse of sovereigns. In addition, his wife – Anna Young Reid MacLachlan – was given two silver candelabra and a pin in the shape of a shield, now held by the Skye and Lochalsh Archive Centre.

Anna herself was politically active. She was –

alongside her mother, Isabella Reid – vital in the movement to have the Ross Memorial Hospital built in Portree in 1889 and sat on a Ladies' Committee which raised money for the campaign. She was also – clearly – embedded in the social networks around the land reform movement her husband was involved in. There are references in his letters to her managing his correspondence for him and we know from Ivory's monitoring of Dugald that meetings were being held at their house. With this in mind, she was likely more involved than the historical record reflects, as is so often the case with women. Ivory didn't think Mary Jane MacKenzie was worth investigating herself – we only know of her role because he confronted her about the sender of the telegrams in a scene which made national papers. This begs the question of how many other women, like Anna, were not recorded because of the inherent sexism of the nineteenth century and the records it left us to work with today.

MacLachlan's dismissal was also marked in more dramatic terms, with a dummy brought into the meeting wearing a hat painted with the words 'Black Ivory.' The effigy of the Sheriff was then carried through the village while a gathering crowd booed, followed by a piper playing 'Dead March.' They ended their parade in Somerled Square, where the effigy was burned and trampled by those watching in a flood of fury about his behaviour. They, were, more than anything, sick of his unchecked power.



4:COURTHOUSE

Now, we are just going around the corner of Somerled Square to the courthouse, Dugald's workplace as Sheriff Clerk Depute.

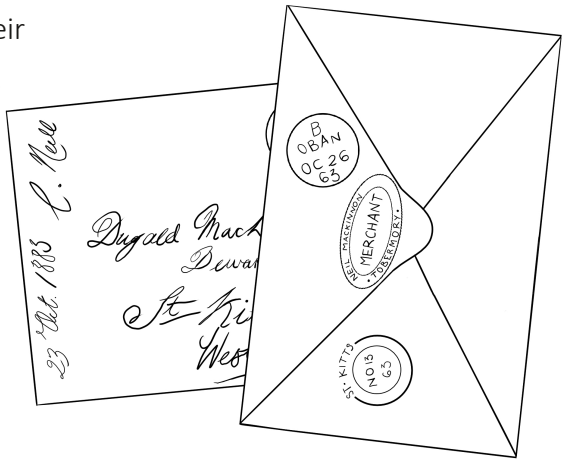
In 1883, the government announced the creation of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Condition of Crofters and Cottars in the Highlands and Islands – now more widely known as the 'Napier Commission'. This was a board of commissioners, chaired by its namesake Lord Francis Napier, which travelled around the region, interviewing people from all walks of life about land, its management, and living conditions on it. Now transcribed and digitized, it offers a huge wealth of information about all aspects of life.

Dugald MacLachlan was central to the Napier Commission meetings in Skye, translating the statements of Gaelic speakers who either had no English or were not comfortable speaking it. He was also, on 24 May 1883, interviewed himself at a meeting of the Commissioners held here at the Court House. In this, Dugald stated that he lived in Scotland his whole life, with the exception of a few years spent abroad.

While he did not specify where, a series of envelopes at Skye and Lochalsh Archive Centre supply the answer, despite being empty. Spanning 1861 to 1865, they are addressed to Dugald in St. Kitts, a British colony at the time, on two different plantations: Willetts and Dewars.

The letters to Willetts estate were sent care of Donald MacLachlan, a cousin of Dugald's who had found success managing the sugar plantation owned by George Buckley-Mathew, a politician who held positions across the British Empire and so likely rarely visited his St. Kitts property. It was a common pattern for those working in the colonies to support family members in making their way there too; Donald's position gave Dugald some security while he looked for employment and accommodation himself.

After that, MacLachlan found himself work as a sugar plantation manager on Dewars estate. This was during a period of turmoil in St. Kitts itself. Slavery had been abolished in 1834, meaning that plantations were desperate for cheap labour. To address this, complex and coercive laws were made around the wage labour system which forced many formerly enslaved people to continue in their previous work. Moreover, land was at a premium, restricting other options for income and places to live. This was worsened by



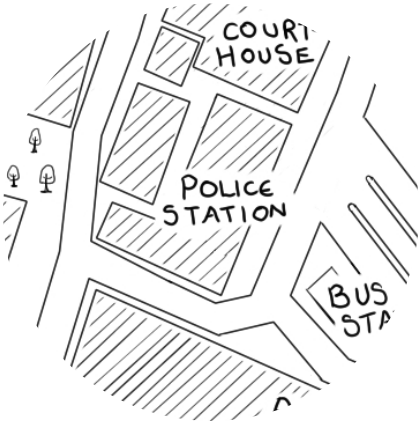
absentee landlordism, meaning that most estates were run by overseers and managers, like Dugald and his cousin.

The Indian indentured servant system was put in place to provide cheap workers. This saw around 420,000 Indian people taken to British colonies in West Indies between the mid-19th century and its end at the time of the First World War. They were contracted to work in return for their passage, usually for five years, though they were often trapped into extending and renewing contracts, increasing the period of unpaid labour. 337 of these indentured servants from India arrived in St. Kitts in the early 1860s and 29 were assigned to Dewar's Estate during Dugald's time there – the largest group of workers assigned to any single estate in the island.

Returning to the Napier Commission can give us an idea of how Dugald's experiences in St. Kitts shaped his view of the world. Within it, he advocates for land to be made available to crofters and cottars and then controversially argues that they should be supported to stock the land with animals using the funds of the Established Church. On being asked whether he agreed that there would always need to be some level of emigration from the Highlands and Islands to keep the population at a level which the land could support, his response may be surprising to us today:

> I would like to see the country so comfortable that there would be just a natural outflow of people to the waste places of the world, to accomplish what Providence seems to be in course of accomplishing– giving the government of the world to this nation, to the English-speaking people.

Dugald MacLachlan encapsulates a stance which may seem hypocritical to us now: the land rights of the people in the Highlands and Islands were worth protecting, while those native to places which had come under the rule of the British Empire should be cleared and their land seized for more 'productive' use. These are discourses that framed and informed views on land in the Highlands and Islands in the 1880s and the legacies of imperial ideas of stewardship and productivity still shape the management of natural resources.



5: POLICE STATION

Just a short walk this time – along to the police station – and, as promised, a return to the Herbusta crofters and their experiences of the justice system. After weeks on the run, in December of 1885, the men handed themselves in to the police station which still stands here on the edge of Somerled Square. Sheriff Ivory claimed they surrendered because:

> 'They wished to prevent the police from getting any special mark of recognition for their capture.'

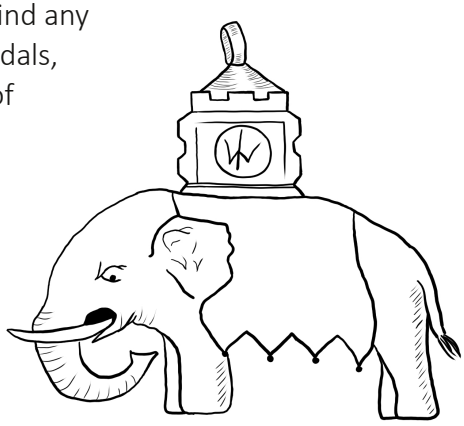
This referenced the fact that Ivory had been giving medals to policemen involved in arresting crofters and cottars. I have managed to track down evidence of two sets of medals awarded by the Sheriff in the 1880s.

The first were given to policemen involved in the arrest of Norman Stewart on 30 January 1885. Norman was a crofter who successfully defended himself against charges of mobbing and rioting at a trial in Portree Sheriff Court, proving he had been trying to prevent violence during the confrontation. The medals, though small in size, were elaborate in design and engraved on one side with 'Arrest of Parnell, Valtos, 30 Jan. 1885' and the other 'For zeal & activity,

from Sheriff Ivory.'

'Parnell' was the nickname given to Norman for his leading role in land agitation on the Kilmuir estate. It referred to Charles Stewart Parnell, the president and parliamentary spokesperson of the Irish National Land League. The use of the nickname 'Parnell' instead of 'Norman Stewart', from Ivory's perspective, worked to make Norman seem more threatening and powerful. One of these medals is now on display at the National Museums of Scotland, although it is described as an 'ornament for a watch chain', shaping how these histories are marked and remembered.

A second set of medals was awarded in connection with the arrest of a group of crofters and cottars in Garalapin near Woodend, just one day after the first raid on Herbusta. While I have not managed to find any surviving Garalapin medals, there is an early draft of their design in a collection of Ivory's papers at the National Records of Scotland. This depicts an elephant with an elaborate decoration



mounted on its back, bearing a symbol made of Ivory's initials: W. I. Below, the designer captioned it with:

> 'The Order of the Elephant, or an adaption of your crest!'

A play on his surname, in this Ivory is marking the police with his own symbol, unmistakably marking out their loyalties.

No medals were given in connection with the Herbusta crofters; they were never arrested. However, they were still tried at the High Court of Justiciary in Edinburgh in January 1887. This was not the usual process: following the criminal justice system at the time, they should have been tried in Portree or – in extreme cases – Inverness. Instead, the group had to travel to Edinburgh at their own expense, to an unfamiliar city, away from the support of their community. This was likely a purposeful decision: court cases could be used as an opportunity for further protest and the creation of public symbols. Taking the Herbusta trial to Edinburgh avoided this risk. The Herbusta men, listed below, were all found guilty and served time in Calton Jail in Edinburgh.

Prison Sentences

One month	Two months
Willian MacArthur	Alexander MacMillan
William Beaton	Donald Beaton
John MacKenzie	John MacDonald
Charles MacIntosh	

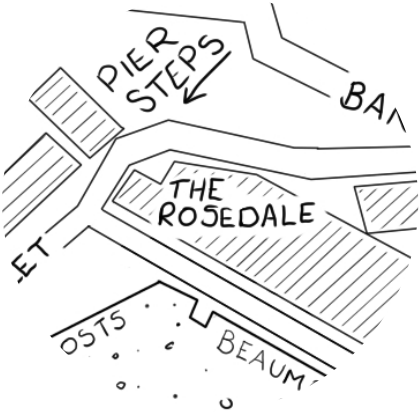
Meanwhile, Anne MacMillan – arrested during the first raid on Herbusta – was also called to trial in Edinburgh alongside her husband, Alexander MacMillan. However, after making the journey to Edinburgh, the charges against her were withdrawn on the morning of the trial. No public explanation was given

until Anne's acquittal was discussed in the House of Commons on 16 March 1887, with pro-land reform MPs criticising the lateness of the decision and calling attention to a medical certificate which had been issued to Anne. It explained that she was suffering from an infection following a miscarriage, which the doctor blamed on the exposure and distress of her arrest.

During the discussion in parliament, the Lord Advocate claimed he didn't know about MacMillan's condition until the morning of the trial; that was why he had been so late in withdrawing the case against her. Furthermore, he given her money for her travel, which was only done in exceptional cases. When this money ran out two months later and Anne found herself bedbound by her illness and in the care of her sister in Glasgow, she wrote to the Lord Advocate to ask for more support. His response was to send a local law official who forced his way into her sickroom and accused her of spending the money on new dresses.

While imprisoned, one of the Herbusta crofters – William Beaton – composed a song about his experiences- ''S Muladach Mi 'n Diugh 's Mi 'g Èirigh' ('Sad Am I as I Rise Today'). There is a recording of Annie Arnott and her daughter Margaret Arnott from Linicro, Kilmuir, singing the song on Tobar an Dualchais. The link can be found in the Back Matters, as well as an English translation of the lyrics. In it, William makes a rollcall of his fellow prisoners, including Anne, and closes out by introducing the subject of our next stop:

O, a Mhàiri Mhòr nan Òran, 'S math an drama thug thu dhòmhsa!	O Big Màiri of the Songs, what a splendid dram you gave me!



6: THE ROSEDALE

We are continuing down the side of the police station and then left along to the Harbour Viewpoint, where we will cut down the Pier Steps to the Rosedale. Here, on the side of the building, you will see a plaque for Màiri Mhòr nan Òran (‘Big Mary of the Songs’) or Mary MacPherson, marking where she spent her final few days.

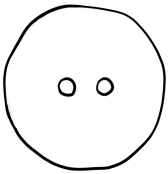
Song was a popular form of expressing discontent at the actions of those in power in the nineteenth-century Highlands and Islands and so bards played an important role in land agitation. Màiri, who was from Skeabost and lived there in the 1880s, is perhaps the best known. She became a figurehead of the land movement through her powerful songs and frequent performances. She is also one of very few women who has been given a place in the history of land agitation in the Highlands and Islands, though there are many areas of her life which are less well known and deserve attention.

Sheriff Ivory did not escape the power of her pen. On 6 January 1887, a song by the name of ‘Oran Cumha an Ibhirich’ (‘Elegy Song on Ivory’) appeared in the 'Scottish Highlander', a radical anti-landlord newspaper. In it, Màiri pretends she has

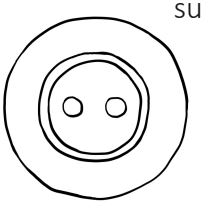
heard that Ivory is dead and celebrates without mincing her words, despite the clear risk he posed when angered:

Saighdear, mas fhìor, Chan fhacas a ghnìomh Ach air siteig no liath òtraichean, ’S e ’na bhòcan air cloinn ’S air mnathan san oidhch’, Gus na sgreamhaich e’n Roinn Eòrpachail.	A soldier, supposedly; he was to be seen in action only on a dung-hill or on grey muck-heaps; he was a spectre haunting children and women at night, until he disgusted Europe.

However, Màiri’s political activity extended beyond her songs. She was also a talented and passionate textile worker, designing and making her own tweeds and tartans, and she used these skills to make a public statement about the management of land and its resources by gifting her work to key figures within the movement.

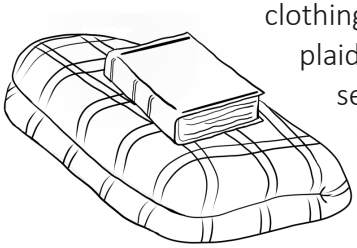


In 1882, she gifted a full suit to Charles Fraser-Mackintosh, the MP for Inverness burghs where he earned popularity by standing up for the rights of tenants in his constituency, as well as being an active proponent of Gaelic culture and language. At the time of the gift, he was actively pushing for the creation of a commission to inquire into the living conditions of crofters and cottars in the Highlands and Islands – which succeeded with the establishment of the Napier Commission in 1883. Màiri’s suit was made for him entirely from materials grown and produced in Skye, with buttons made from the branch of a tree from the garden of the Jacobite heroine Flora MacDonald at Flodigarry.



In June 1885, Màiri made a similar gift to Captain Cameron: a plaid woven on a handloom. The Captain had, the year before, resigned from his position as captain of the Lochiel on being told that the ship was going to be used to carry marines for Sheriff Ivory's military expeditions.

Through these gifts, Màiri was doing two things. First, she was generating some positive attention for Skye in a time when its population was subject to widespread criticism for its land agitation. Second, she was crafting a collective identity. Clothes, as the way people present themselves, are fundamental to how they are seen and understood. By clothing both herself and others in her plaids and tartans, Màiri was securing their place as a sort of unofficial uniform for the land reform movement, adding to the sense of a shared identity.



At the core of Màiri's work was the creation of a community to work together to protect land rights for the good of people across the Highlands and Islands, whether through her textile work or her songs. More than anything, her message was, as summarised in 'Eilean a' Cheò' ('The Island of Mist') written about her home island:

Cuimhnichibh gur sluagh sibh Is cumaibh suas ur còir	Remember that you are a people And stand up for your rights

ONE MORE THING

‘'S Muladach Mi 'n Diugh 's Mi 'g Èirigh’- William Beaton

QR code on final page or follow this link:
tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/99725?l=en

To the tune of ‘Chunna Mi 'n Damh Donn 's na h-Èildean’ (‘I Saw the Brown Stags and the Hinds’). This is an excellent bit of poetic justice. Spreading deer forests, a cornerstone of early Highland and Island tourism, were a major roadblock in the unfair management of land. William Beaton, in telling his story, took the tune of a song about a deer hunt and replaced it with his own experiences in trying to protect and expand the land rights of himself and his community. The translation is Donald Meek's from 'Tuath is Tighearna' except where the recording deviates from the version he collected- then the translation is mine.

'S muladach mi 'n-diugh 's mi 'g èirigh
Anns a' phrìosan an Dùn Èideann;
'S muladach mi 'n-diugh 's mi 'g èirigh.
A Dhòmhnaill Ruaidh ud ann a Hàise,
Walkigeadh air feadh a' ghàrraidh,
'S olc a thig an deise bhàn dhut,
Ged bu shràiceil air an fhèill thu.
[Sèist a-rithist]
Uilleam MacArtair 's e cho gòrach,
'S eagal aige roimh na bòcain;
Cha tig gin dhiubh tron a' chòmhlaidh,
'S cha tèid bòrd dhith as a chèile.
[Sèist a-rithist]
Tha Iain Ceannaiche nas fheàrr dheth,
Pailteas aig' de Bheurla 's gràmar;
Nì e stòraidh ris a' warder

Sad am I as I rise today
in the prison in Edinburgh;
sad am I as I rise today.
Read-haired Donald who hails from Haise,
walking there throughout the garden,
the white suit befits you badly,
although you were pompous at the market.
[Chorus repeats]
William MacArthur is such a silly fellow,
he is afraid of ghosts;
none of them can come through the door,
and not one board of it will break.
[Chorus repeats]
Iain the Merchant is better off,
he has an abundance of English

Feuch an ann as fheàrr a ghrèidheadh.
[Sèist a-rithist]
Uilleam Peutan 's e cho seòlta,
Ged nach eil a Bheurla dòigheil;
Canaidh e "Sir" ris a warder,
Mar bu chòir a bhith sa Bheurla.
[Sèist a-rithist]
O, a Theàrlaich 'Ic-an-Tòisich,
'S mairg a chunnaic ort an còmhdach;
'S snasail rachadh tu 'nad fhòram,
Dol Di-dòmhnaich don èisdeachd.
[Sèist a-rithist]
Seonaidh MacAoidhein 's e cho brònach,
A' caoidh Anna Nic-an-Tòisich;
Chan fhaigh cìobair i no Nòrman
Gus am faigh e còir dha fhein i.
[Sèist a-rithist]
Facal beag mu bhean mo nàbaidh-
Thug iad i don chùirt as àirde;
Nuair a chunnaic iad a h-àilgheas,
Cha bu dàna leo a h-èigheach.
[Sèist a-rithist]
O, a Mhàiri Mhòr nan Òran,
'S math an drama thug thu dhòmhsa!
Is ma thilleas mise beò às,
Gheibh thu còig airson na tè ud.
[Sèist a-rithist]

and grammar;
he will tell the warder a story
to see if he'll get better attention.
[Chorus repeats]
William Beaton is such a cunning man,
although his English is not up to much;
he will always say "Sir" to them,
just as it should be said in English.
[Chorus repeats]
O Charles MacIntosh,
Pity the one who saw you in such attire!
You would go splendidly in top dress
on your way to church on Sunday.
[Chorus repeats]
Johnnie MacAoidhein is so sorrowful
since he misses Anna MacIntosh
neither a shepherd nor Norman will get her;
Until he gets her rightfully for himself.
[Chorus repeats]
A brief word now about my neighbour's wife,
whom they took to the highest court;
when they observed her proud condition,
they did not dare to summon her.
[Chorus repeats]
O Big Màiri of the Songs,
what a splendid dram you gave me!
But if I return alive,
you will get five in return for that one.
[Chorus repeats]

Recommended Reading

(This is a far from exhaustive collection of reading materials which have been fundamental to my way of thinking about land here and its history. The full sources for this zine are available online, via the QR code below.)

Donald Meek, 'Tuath is Tighearna/Tenants and Landlords' (1995)
Andy Wightman, 'The Poor Had No Lawyers: Who owns Scotland (and how they got it)' (2011)
The Napier Commission (1884)- uhi.ac.uk/en/research-enterprise/cultural/centre-for-history/research/resources/the-napier-commission/
James Hunter, 'The Making of the Crofting Community' (1976)

A Note on Maps

I have included maps of Portree in the 1880s and in 2025. These are for reference only; I am not a cartographer and there were definitely creative liberties taken. I was also working with different information in making the two iterations of Portree. I think this is an interesting side-effect of how the way we think about land has changed- or at least, the way we use maps. The OS maps of the 1880s were a practice in land management- surveying, delineating, naming. Now, they're primarily for getting places, explaining a focus on roads.

A Note on Illustrations

Pages 9 & 10- Ships based on 'The Agitation Among the Skye Crofters: From Sketches by an Artist Who Is Visiting the Disturbed Districts', The Graphic, 6 December 1884, p. 10
Page 11- Map based on Ordnance Survey, Inverness-shire – Isle of Skye VI.4 (Kilmuir), 25:1 (1878)
Page 16- Based loosely on SL/D475/4/2, Skye and Lochalsh Archives
Page 19- Envelopes based on SL/D475/1/1, Skye and Lochalsh Archives
Page 23- Elephant medal based on design in letter from Sheriff Paul Blair to Sheriff William Ivory, 7 November 1886, NRS, GD1/36/1/45/23; Parnell medal based on K.1997.1133, National Museum of Scotland.
Pages 27 & 28- Buttons, plaid and book from imagination.

Acknowledgements

I have had help from lots of folk to put this together, not least from:
ATLAS Arts, the School of Plural Futures, and Portree Historical Society (for being sounding boards for earlier drafts)
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Chicory Romaniszyn (for zine advice and proofing)

Contact Info

If you have questions, comments, or information to add (or a long lost Ivory medal in your attic), contact me at gracewright.skye@gmail.com. I also sometimes post on Bluesky and Instagram- @graceq22 for both.

Sources

For full sources for the zine and the online version, follow the QR code below or this link: https://archive.org/details/@gwrightskye/lists/1/plotting-the-protest%3A-portree

Online Zine & Sources

Recording of "'S Muladach

Support my future work (and hopefully further editions!) at the QR code below, or this link: https://pay.sumup.com/b2c/QNV5A0H6